Oil giants deny lying about climate change; Firms accused of misleading public about role in global warming

The Toronto Star

October 29, 2021 Friday

Copyright 2021 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: BUSINESS; Pg. B4

Length: 904 words

Byline: Matthew Daly The Associated Press

Body

WASHINGTON-Top executives of ExxonMobil and other oil giants denied spreading disinformation about climate change as they sparred Thursday with congressional Democrats over allegations that the industry concealed evidence about the dangers of global warming.

Testifying at a landmark House of Representatives hearing, ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods said the company "has long acknowledged the reality and risks of climate change, and it has devoted significant resources to addressing those risks."

The public statements on climate "are and have always been truthful, fact-based ... and consistent" with mainstream climate science, Woods said.

Democrats immediately challenged the statements by Woods and other oil executives, accusing them of engaging in a decades-long, industry-wide campaign to spread disinformation about the contribution of fossil fuels to global warming.

"They are obviously lying like the tobacco executives were," said New York Rep. Carolyn Maloney, chair of the House oversight committee.

She was referring to a 1994 hearing with tobacco executives who famously testified that they didn't believe nicotine was addictive. The reference was one of several to the tobacco hearing as Democrats sought to pin down oil executives on whether they believe in climate change and that burning fossil fuels such as oil contribute to global warming.

Republicans accused Democrats of grandstanding over an issue popular with their base as U.S. President Joe Biden's climate agenda teeters in Congress.

Kentucky Rep. James Comer, the top Republican on the oversight panel, called the hearing a "distraction from the crises that the Biden administration's policies have caused," including gasoline prices that have risen by $1 (U.S.) per gallon since January. "The purpose of this hearing is clear: To deliver partisan theatre for prime time news," Comer said.

The hearing comes after months of public efforts by Democrats to obtain documents and other information on the oil industry's role in stopping climate action over multiple decades. The fossil fuel industry has had scientific evidence about the dangers of climate change since at least 1977, yet spread denial and doubt about the harm its products cause- undermining science and preventing meaningful action on climate change, Maloney and other Democrats said.

"Do you agree that (climate change) is an existential threat? Yes or no?" Maloney asked Shell Oil president Gretchen Watkins.

"I agree that this is a defining challenge for our generation, absolutely," Watkins replied.

Watkins, Woods and other oil executives said they agreed with Maloney on the existence and threat posed by climate change, but they refused her request to pledge that their companies would not spend money - either directly or indirectly - to oppose efforts to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

California Rep. Ro Khanna, who leads a subcommittee on the environment, said he hopes "Big Oil will not follow the same playbook as Big Tobacco" in misrepresenting the facts to Congress.

"As I'm sure you realize, that didn't turn out too well for them," Khanna said. "These companies must be held accountable."

The committee released a memo Thursday charging that the oil industry's public support for climate reforms has not been matched by meaningful actions, and that the industry has spent billions of dollars to block reforms. Oil companies frequently boast about their efforts to produce clean energy in advertisements and social media posts accompanied by sleek videos or pictures of wind turbines.

Maloney and other Democrats have focused particular ire on Exxon, after a senior lobbyist for the company was caught in a secret video bragging that Exxon had fought climate science through "shadow groups" and had targeted influential senators in an effort to weaken Biden's climate agenda, including a bipartisan infrastructure bill and a sweeping climate and social policy bill currently moving through Congress.

In the video, Keith McCoy, a former Washington-based lobbyist for Exxon, dismissed the company's public expressions of support for a proposed carbon tax on fossil fuel emissions as a "talking point."

McCoy's comments were made public in June by the environmental group Greenpeace UK, which secretly recorded him and another lobbyist in Zoom interviews. McCoy no longer works for the company, Exxon said last month.

Woods, Exxon's chair and chief executive, has condemned McCoy's statements and said the company stands by its commitment to work on finding solutions to climate change.

Chevron CEO Michael Wirth also denied misleading the public on climate change. "Any suggestion that Chevron has engaged in an effort to spread disinformation and mislead the public on these complex issues is simply wrong," he said.

Maloney and Khanna sharply disputed that. They compared tactics used by the oil industry to those long deployed by the tobacco industry to resist regulation "while selling products that kill hundreds of thousands of Americans."

While U.S. leaders and the oil industry rightly focus on lowering carbon emissions, the world consumes 100 million barrels of oil per day - an amount not likely to decrease any time soon, said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's top lobbying group.

"The world is going to continue to consume a lot of oil and natural gas from now until very long in the future."

The Associated Press

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: GLOBAL WARMING (92%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); CLIMATOLOGY (90%); DISINFORMATION & MISINFORMATION (90%); EXECUTIVES (90%); NEGATIVE NEWS (90%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); ADDICTION (78%); EARTH & ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCE (78%); EMISSIONS (78%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (78%); GREENHOUSE GASES (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); OIL & GAS PRICES (78%); PARTISANSHIP (78%); SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY (70%); PRICES (68%); SUBSTANCE ABUSE (68%); GASOLINE PRICES (50%)

Company: EXXON MOBIL CORP (58%); SHELL OIL CO (51%)

Ticker: XOM (NYSE) (58%)

Industry: NAICS324110 PETROLEUM REFINERIES (58%); NAICS325110 PETROCHEMICAL MANUFACTURING (58%); NAICS211130 NATURAL GAS EXTRACTION (58%); NAICS211120 CRUDE PETROLEUM EXTRACTION (58%); SIC2911 PETROLEUM REFINERIES (51%); GLOBAL WARMING (92%); OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (91%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (90%); TOBACCO (90%); FOSSIL FUELS (89%); EMISSIONS (78%); OIL & GAS PRICES (78%); NICOTINE (77%); TOBACCO INDUSTRY (77%); GASOLINE PRICES (50%)

Person: JOE BIDEN (89%); CAROLYN MALONEY (79%); DARREN WOODS (79%); JAMES COMER (79%); RO KHANNA (79%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%)

Load-Date: October 29, 2021

End of Document